United States Department of Agriculture

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Veterinary Services

Mexican-Origin Cattle in Feedlots

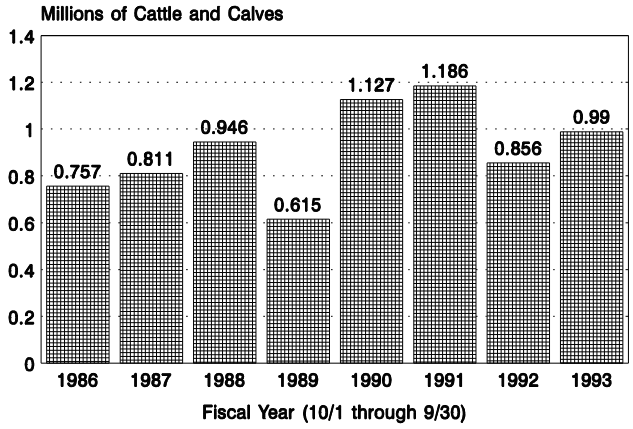
National Animal Health Monitoring System

With the advent of freer trade in North America, concerns for the health of U.S. domestic cattle have been heard. Specifically, concerns have been raised about the potential threat cattle coming from across the border for feeding pose to U.S. disease control efforts.

The USDA's National Animal Health Monitoring System (NAHMS) contacted feedlots of less than 1,000 capacity across the United States by telephone. Feedlots with 1,000 or more capacity from the 13 primary cattle feeding states[1] were also contacted. Cattle inventory in these 13 states was approximately 85 percent of the national inventory as of January 1, 1994, and these 13 states fed in excess of 85 percent of the total cattle fed for slaughter in the United States. Large capacity feedlots comprised 4 percent of feedlots[2], but accounted for 83.3 percent of total feedlot inventory for the 13 states as of January 1, 1994. A total of 1,411 producers responded to Cattle on Feed Evaluation (COFE) interview questions in the fall of 1994 about management of their operations and health of their animals. The study reflected cattle placed on feed from July 1993 through June 1994.

Figure 1

Imports of Feeder and Slaughter Cattle and Calves from Mexico, 1986-1993



(Excludes cattle in bond.)
Source: USDA:APHIS

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Though each year approximately 1 million head of Mexican-origin cattle come into this country for feeding purposes (Figure 1), very few feedlots feed such animals. Only 0.2 percent of all feedlots fed any dairy animals of Mexican origin (0.1 percent small-capacity and 1.6 percent large-capacity feedlots).[3] Very few (0.1 percent small-capacity and 12.6 percent large-capacity feedlots; 0.7 percent overall) fed beef animals of Mexican origin.

Health concerns about these animals center around the opportunity they may have to spread disease to the domestic cattle population. Contact of diseased, Mexican-origin cattle with domestic feeder cattle would pose little risk since most of the feeder cattle are destined for slaughter in a relatively short period of time (less than 6 months). However, some cattle in feedlots may be returned to grazing forage because of prevailing market conditions. From COFE results, it was estimated that less than 2 percent of animals placed on feed in large-capacity feedlots were removed for this reason. Still fewer (1 percent) left small-capacity feedlots to graze forage.

However, it is increasingly common for breeding cattle, particularly replacement females, to be fed in feedlot settings to provide controlled and predictable gains, assure adequate size when they are due to be bred and re-enter the herd, and potentially facilitate estrus synchronization programs. A minority of feedlots reported feeding breeding stock (beef or dairy). Figure 2 shows feeding beef animals to be used for breeding is more common in small-capacity feedlots (7.2 percent) than large-capacity feedlots (5.1 percent). The reverse is true for feeding dairy animals to be used for breeding.

1 Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Washington.
2 In 1993, these larger operations numbered 1,767.
3 In September of 1993, Mexico voluntarily curtailed exports of Holstein animals to the U.S. In June of 1994, the U.S. banned the importation of Holstein steers and Holstein spayed heifers for feeding.

Another source of breeding age animals from Mexico are in bond[1] cattle. No small-capacity producers reported feeding in bond cattle from Mexico. Nearly 1 percent of large-capacity feedlots reported feeding in bond cattle from Mexico during the reference period.

Only .04 percent of all feedlots fed both cattle of Mexican origin (beef cattle, dairy cattle, or in bond cattle) and breeding stock (beef or dairy). Nearly 5 percent of feedlots that fed beef cattle of Mexican origin also fed breeding stock (beef or dairy). However, given the percentage of feedlots that fed beef animals of Mexican origin, this is a very small number of producers. Similarly, approximately 7 percent of producers that fed dairy animals of Mexican origin also fed some domestic breeding stock. Again, this was a very small number, and it has effectively been reduced to 0 given the current ban on imports of Holstein steers and Holstein spayed heifers. The above numbers refer to potential contact of domestic breeding stock with cattle of Mexican origin. Though both types of cattle were fed in feedlots, this does not indicate that they were in contact or even that they were fed at the same time. Still, the mere potential for contact bears consideration for on-going disease control programs.

NAHMS collaborators included the National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA), State and Federal Veterinary Medical Officers, and the National Veterinary Services Laboratories (USDA:APHIS:VS).

Other COFE information is available on the following topics: Branding, environmental management, and quality assurance. Study results on beef cow/calf, dairy cattle, and swine are also available. For more information contact:

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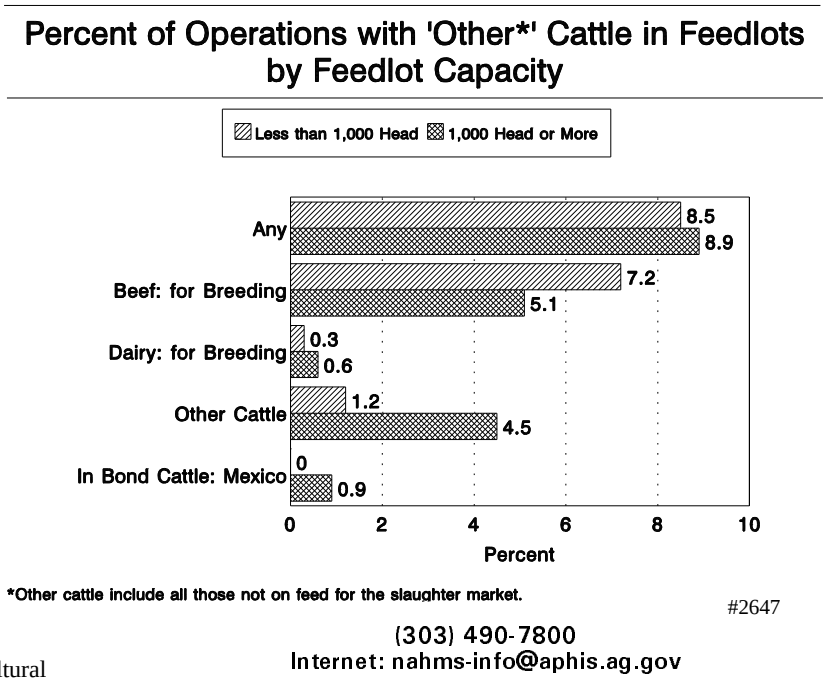
Figure 2



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1 Reproductively-intact animals from Mexico are permitted to enter the U.S. if the owner posts a bond (amount based on the animal's value.) The bond is forfeited if the animals fail to return to Mexico.